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COLLEGE

THINGS CAN TEACH

. . .the time has come the teacher said to teach with many things: with heavy bricks, with plastic bottles, with pointed chalk, with rounded watch, with ripe banana and with threaded string. (If Fearless Floyd Allen can find enough essential self discipline to pass beyond the premise of this column to what laughingly passes for its content, without fussing over the friction in my diction, I'll trade him two morphemes for a phoneme and we'll split an infinitive with Dr. Gilbert.) In plain English, I have found that things can teach kids at el Centro at least as successfully as books can. When, of course, text and thing are used by turns classroom momentum sometimes builds—even to renewed interest and sustained enthusiasm on the part of under-read and over-written captives of "required courses." Things can be used to sharpen the sensory awareness of students as those same things which are a part of the physical environment can test the student faculty for purposeful critical thinking. Teachers in search of ways to introduce variety into their routine might try thingifying their way to class discussion.

. . .Take a huge watch-a' la Jay Hammond — a watch on the end of a long chain — to class with you. As an ice-breaker, you might ask you new student to say something about the watch that he could also say about himself: "The watch is round like I am" The watch has a face or hands like mine." etc. Once you have made some new acquaintances as you make your lists, you are in position to ask students what they have learned about the value of listings or analogies. Once past that point, get a student to take note of the huge numerals on the face of the watch. From there try branching into a discussion of the following question:

What would happen, what would the consequences be, what would man have to give up or change if there were no numbering (mathematical) system?

. . .Stick a very green banana into an even larger Mason Jar. Take the unripened fruit in the jar to class with you. Encourage the puzzled students to take very careful notes as class discussion develops. Then, ask them what they see inside the jar. Most likely they will respond saying they see a very green, unripened banana with a broken stem, spotted in a few places, shaped in a curve, etc. Once they have completed their catalogue of detailed description, put the jar and banana aside and turn back to the next. Cart the ripening fruit to your office. As you leave, however, be quick to remind the students of exactly what they said they saw inside the jar — a very green banana with a broken stem stuck inside a Mason Jar. Let the same banana age and rot inside the jar and sit inside your office for a week or two. One day a bit later turn up in class with the same jar but the rotten banana. Then, ask the students what they see there. Doubtless a lively semantic squabble will ensue as to whether you and the class are still talking about or even perceiving the same banana you started the experiment with. Most probably, the upshot of all this is that the kids will point out that — like all things — the banana has, while rotting and aging, changed its character and composition. Once free of that delightful semantic snarl, you are in a position to solicit from the students working definitions of change. —An interesting variety of insights should evolve as each student takes his turn at definition. Once the class has shaped a collective concept of change, you can give the discussion a future thrust. Perhaps you could begin by asking individuals to cit significant changes in society in the next week, month, year, decade, century, etc. Let it take you where the dialogue will.

. . .Take a sturdy piece of colored chalk to class with you. Without breaking the silence as you enter the classroom go to the board and write something like: "Silence is beautiful." Perhaps you'd prefer to begin with a controversial statement impinging on your own discipline.Once you've written something on the board take care not to shatter the silence. Instead, give the chalk to a student. Sooner or later, he'll have to do something with it —write with it, eat it, pass it on to someone else. Most probably the chalk will pass from student to student as the catalogue of blackboard wit, wisecracks, poetry and puzzlements grows. When and if the momentum of the experiment wanes, ask the class if they'd prefer the silence be broken. Once it is finally broken, ask the students why they think you did what you did. The more perceptive kids should notice: (1) The exercise drew more students that usual-perhaps some who do not normally contribute to class discussion — into the activity. (2) Hopefully, students in the class learned more from and

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about each other than they perhaps knew before. (3) Some will suggest that it reminded them of the lost or often overlooked value in silence and they will explore its special meaning and value in a society far too used to the din and repetition — the sheer over-noise of the spoken word. (4) Some students may even point out that we have become so used to spoken language in a media-oriented society that we no longer listen very well. All of these and more constitute the special blessings wrought by a piece of chalk, a blackboard, and a group of kids making renewed acquaintance with the rich dimension of silence. —Bud Church, Media and Methods.

. . .Take an epic milk jug made of plastic to class and use it as a springboard to a serious exploration of values. As why people people like to buy items made of plastic? What does it say about the advantages and disadvantages of plastic? What does it say about the values of the consumer who buys and uses plastic items?

. . .Haul a large red brick to class. Just as a pump-primer, ask the members of the three competing teams how many uses they can think of for a brick? Watch the hands fly!

. . .the time has come the teacher said to think of other things with which to snare non-reading students and lure them back to print. Anything is worth a try!

—Scott Pearce